

What is lactose?

Lactose* is a sugar found in milk and milk products. The small **intestine** produces **lactase**, an **enzyme** that breaks down lactose. The small intestine is an organ that breaks down the food you eat. Enzymes are proteins that help to cause chemical changes in the body.

What is lactose intolerance?

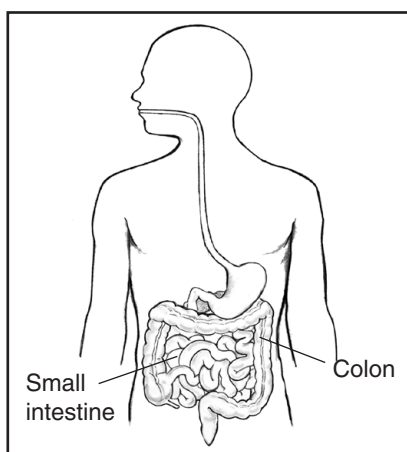
Lactose **intolerance** means you have symptoms such as bloating, diarrhea, and gas after you have milk or milk products.

If your small intestine does not produce much lactase, you cannot break down much lactose. Lactose that does not break down goes to your colon. The colon is an organ that absorbs water from stool and changes it from a liquid to a solid form. In your colon, bacteria that normally live in the colon break down the lactose and create fluid and gas, causing you to have symptoms.

*See the Pronunciation Guide for tips on how to say the words in **bold** type.

The causes of low lactase in your small intestine can include the following:

- In some people, the small intestine makes less lactase starting at about age 2, which may lead to symptoms of lactose intolerance. Other people start to have symptoms later, when they are teenagers or adults.
- Infection, disease, or other problems that harm the small intestine can cause low lactase levels. Low lactase levels can cause you to become lactose intolerant until your small intestine heals.
- Being born early may cause babies to be lactose intolerant for a short time after they are born.
- In a rare form of lactose intolerance, the small intestine produces little or no lactase enzyme from birth.



The digestive tract

Not all people with low lactase levels have symptoms. If you have symptoms, you are lactose intolerant.

Most people who are lactose intolerant can have some milk or milk products and not have symptoms. The amount of lactose that causes symptoms is different from person to person.



People sometimes confuse lactose intolerance with a milk allergy. While lactose intolerance is a digestive problem, a milk allergy is a reaction by the body's immune system to one or more milk proteins. If you have a milk allergy, having even a small amount of milk or milk product can be life threatening. A milk allergy most commonly occurs in the first year of life. Lactose intolerance occurs more often during the teen years or adulthood.

Can anyone have lactose intolerance?

Anyone can have lactose intolerance. In the United States, some people are more likely to be lactose intolerant, including

- African Americans
- American Indians
- Hispanics/Latinos
- Asian Americans

People with European heritage are least likely to be lactose intolerant.